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## FP2020: A research roadmap

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# FP2020: A RESEARCH ROADMAP



The global community came together in July 2012 in pursuit of an ambitious yet essential goal: ensuring that 120 million additional women and girls have access to effective family planning information and services by the year 2020. National governments, civil society, and the private sector resolved to tackle the numerous supply and demand barriers that prevent many women from using contraceptives. Donors committed \$2.6 billion in new funding to support these efforts, matched by pledges from many developing-country governments. With only eight years in which to achieve the FP2020 goal, the community must guarantee that each of these dollars is used wisely.

Fifty years of research and on-the-ground experience tell us much about why and how to invest in voluntary family planning programs. The essential elements are clear and well documented. To reap the broad benefits of family planning, clients must have easy access to a wide range of affordable contraceptive methods through multiple service delivery channels in a good-quality, reliable fashion. In 2012, the Population Council completed two influential publications summarizing the existing evidence, recommending best practices for program implementation,<sup>1</sup> and highlighting gaps in family planning research.<sup>2</sup>

Despite existing knowledge and the tremendous progress that has been made, 222 million women and girls still have an unmet need for family planning.<sup>3</sup> The global family planning community does not yet have all the answers needed to ensure that every woman, everywhere, has the information and services she needs to decide whether and when to have a child. As in any endeavor, the last mile toward achieving universal access to

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1 Bongaarts, J, Cleland J, Townsend JW, Bertrand JT, Das Gupta M. 2012. *Family Planning Programs for the 21st Century: Rationale and Design*. New York: Population Council.

2 Askew, Ian and Martha Brady. 2012. "Reviewing the evidence and identifying gaps in family planning research: The unfinished agenda to meet FP2020 goals," background document for the Family Planning Research Donor Meeting, 3–4 December 2012. New York: Population Council.

3 Singh S and Darroch JE. 2012. *Adding It Up: Costs and Benefits of Contraceptive Services—Estimates for 2012*, New York: Guttmacher Institute and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

family planning services is likely to be complex and difficult. To achieve their FP2020 commitments, national programs urgently need more evidence and a deeper understanding of how to increase access and improve equity in the provision of family planning services.

The Population Council's work, *Reviewing the Evidence and Identifying Gaps in Family Planning Research: The Unfinished Agenda to Meet FP2020 Goals*, identified 12 knowledge gaps that should be addressed.

This document, a research roadmap for FP2020, proposes ways to close five of the most critical gaps. These include the need to:

- 1. Identify and understand the needs of the most vulnerable and underserved**

A clear, accurate accounting of the particular barriers that still prevent the most disadvantaged women and girls from using family planning services is needed, so that effective interventions can be developed to overcome them.

- 2. Assess the impact of structural interventions on family planning use**

The global family planning community needs a better understanding of the pathways by which family planning can serve as both cause and effect of broader social change that empowers women and girls.

- 3. Evaluate and expand interventions tailored to specific needs of adolescents living in varying circumstances**

Programs need evidence of the appropriateness of interventions that are designed to meet the particular needs of young people whose circumstances vary considerably by age, gender, cultural environment, marital status, educational level, and other factors.

#### **4. Determine cost-effective strategies for mainstreaming integrated family planning services**

While governments recognize that an integrated systems approach to delivering family planning is efficient, acceptable, and sustainable, the process for achieving this at scale varies by type of integration and national setting, requiring context-specific evidence.

#### **5. Identify innovative and sustainable financing mechanisms that increase access without compromising choice or affordability**

In a field long dominated by publicly subsidized services, the vital roles that commercial and not-for-profit health providers and demand-side financing can play in increasing access to affordable contraceptive options is poorly understood. Such understanding is critical to the growth and improved efficiency needed if reproductive health markets in developing countries are to meet the exponential growth in demand for family planning.

Filling these knowledge gaps will require collaboration among multiple stakeholders. Researchers and program implementers should coordinate to ensure that critical evidence is generated and effectively translated into recommendations for policy and practice, while avoiding duplication and ensuring that partners learn from one another. Donors can also provide coordinated support to larger, more complicated research activities. And agreed-upon standards for generating and evaluating the quality of research-based evidence are needed to ensure credibility and appropriateness for decision makers' needs (see sidebar, page 4). Within the emerging FP2020 initiative, stakeholders should prioritize definition of these standards, support the alignment of research efforts, and ensure that evidence is translated into practice so that more efficient, equitable, and effective family planning services are available worldwide.

## RECOMMENDATION:

### Establish Consensus on Evidence Standards

While there is little debate over the need for evidence-based policy and practice, the process for determining what constitutes high-quality evidence on family planning remains less clearly defined.

The most widely accepted scientific standard of evidence of effectiveness is the randomized controlled trial; however, if randomized trials are not possible or would provide evidence that could not be easily generalized, quasi-experimental or rigorous non-experimental designs are used instead. A range of quantitative and qualitative social science and impact evaluation methodologies, known as implementation science, as well as “experiential” evidence based on the insights and expertise of professionals in the field are often used to generate evidence for programmatic recommendations.

As the FP2020 research agenda is formulated, it will be important to achieve consensus among donors and governments regarding the types of evidence that are acceptable as the basis for programs and policies.





# CLOSING FIVE CRITICAL RESEARCH GAPS

## 1. Identify and understand the needs of the most vulnerable and underserved

The essence of FP2020 is equity—ensuring that programs better meet the family planning needs of all women and girls in developing countries. Unmet need

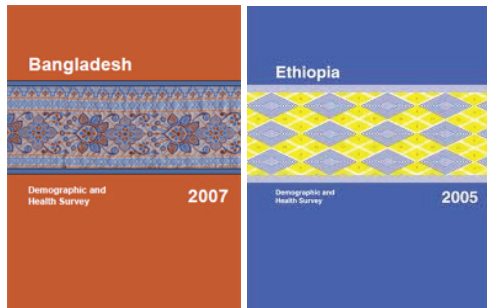


is experienced in different populations, for different reasons, in each setting. Underserved and vulnerable populations include adolescents, sex workers, migrants, indigenous peoples, and those living in urban slums. Because much of our knowledge base is drawn from broad-based surveys that often overlook these groups, innovative research will be required to inform better-targeted funding and programs. These efforts might include:

- Oversampling national surveys to include representation of important populations, for example, unmarried women and men
- Conducting longitudinal research on the social determinants of contraceptive demand and use, to better determine normative and behavioral changes

## 2. Assess the impact of structural interventions on family planning use

We know that women who lack decision making power are less likely to use family planning methods. However, little evidence is available to show which interventions aimed at empowering women by, for example, reducing early marriage



or exposure to unwanted or coerced sex, actually reduce inequities and vulnerability. We also lack data regarding the causal effect of structural interventions on contraceptive use. These evidence gaps can only be filled



through a rigorous, long-term research program. While specifics will vary by country, key steps include:

- Ensuring that all Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) include standard indicators for social determinants of health, so that correlations with family planning use and progress in various areas can be tracked over time
- Conducting prospective impact evaluations of multi-faceted structural interventions using rigorous, preferably randomized designs

### **3. Evaluate and expand interventions tailored to the specific needs of adolescents living in varying circumstances**

Improving access to accurate information and services for adolescents is a global priority. Young people are particularly vulnerable and protecting adolescent girls from unwanted childbearing can generate



tremendous personal and societal benefits over their lifetimes. Researchers should prioritize efforts to ensure that schools, clinics, and communities are meeting adolescents' changing needs, whether they are married or unmarried, in school or at work, living with their parents or on their own. Research priorities include:

- Evaluating the short- and longer-term outcomes of youth-focused programs, such as sexuality education, community support for adolescent-friendly services, and engaging young men as partners and service users
- Measuring the impact of laws, policies, and provider practices on adolescents' access to contraceptives
- Effectively reaching married adolescents to delay first births and space second pregnancies

#### 4. Determine cost-effective strategies for mainstreaming integrated family planning services

Family planning services have been successfully integrated within other health programs through many pilot projects, including maternal care, infant and child health care, and HIV services, but there



are few national or international standards for how best to offer integrated services routinely. Implementation research is needed to guide expansion of proven integration models so that service integration becomes the norm and is sustainable. Efforts in this area could include:

- Identifying and communicating lessons learned from existing experiences of expanding effective and sustainable models of integration
- Testing a process for extending pilot programs nationwide, including organizational modifications, policy adjustments, and budget implications

##### **RECOMMENDATION:**

#### **Build Country Capacity**

While conducting research to fill these evidence gaps, it will also be critical to build country capacity to generate and use research evidence. Key steps include:

- Increasing investment in southern research institutes and training for southern-based researchers
- Strengthening and computerizing national health management information systems, which are weak at monitoring family planning services and do not generally track client characteristics, quality of care, or services provided through the private sector
- Ensuring that policymakers have the skills and support needed to understand and apply research evidence

## 5. Identify innovative and sustainable financing mechanisms that increase access without compromising choice or affordability

Contraceptive commodities are largely publicly and/or donor funded and heavily subsidized to reduce cost barriers to access. A “total market” approach that incorporates the private and NGO sectors can broaden the financing



and delivery options available, but the evidence base is currently limited.

Research priorities include:

- Evaluating the impact and sustainability of alternative financing mechanisms, such as user fees, conditional cash transfers, vouchers, and performance-based incentives
- Assessing various clients' willingness and ability to pay for family planning services
- Comparing the advantages of commercial, social marketing, NGO, and public sector approaches for reaching different populations and communities
- Assessing existing and future markets for contraceptive commodities (including the size of markets and their demographic and geographic characteristics), so that demand can be more accurately forecasted
- Investigating the extent to which innovative financing methods are serving poor or otherwise vulnerable women

## LOOKING AHEAD

Political leadership is essential to ensure that the new research evidence is put into practice. FP2020 has galvanized substantial commitments, but it will be important to sustain this sense of urgency throughout and beyond the next seven years to achieve its goals. This will require effective advocacy in communities, at the national level, and globally.

With coordinated effort and targeted support, these research gaps can be filled, and evidence can be used to inform current and future policies and programs. This work will support the realization of the FP2020 goals, ultimately saving lives, freeing up public resources to invest in other important social and economic development goals, and enabling the next generation of women and girls to pursue their dreams.

The Population Council confronts critical health and development issues—from stopping the spread of HIV to improving reproductive health and ensuring that young people lead full and productive lives. Through biomedical, social science, and public health research in 50 countries, we work with our partners to deliver solutions that lead to more effective policies, programs, and technologies that improve lives around the world. Established in 1952 and headquartered in New York, the Council is a nongovernmental, nonprofit organization governed by an international board of trustees.

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